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International Service: History and Forms, Pitfalls and Potential

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Abstract

International voluntary service represents the contribution of one's time to some cause, which is largely uncompensated and spent in a country other than one's home country. The forms of international service have evolved from roots in missionary service to a focus on development of the host communities and the volunteers. Current trends emphasize mutuality, accountability, and participation by host communities, but against a historical and contemporary backdrop, inequality remains between the volunteers and hosts. This paper speculates a range of possible positive and negative developmental outcomes, programmatic strategies to mediate negative effects, and research to inform program and policy development.

International service programs have existed for decades, but what do we know about their forms and effects? We consider international service a distinct programmatic form of voluntary civic service. Sherraden defines civic service as "an organized period of substantial engagement and contribution to the local, national, or world community, recognized and valued by society, with minimal monetary compensation to the participant" (2001, p. 2). We attach the descriptor "civic" to convey that the action is performed in the public realm, while "service" connects the behavior to the field of voluntary action. As such, an international civic service program has the characteristics of long-term, intensive volunteering whereby the "server" engages in social, economic, or community-based activities in a country other than her home country.

Examples of international service programs include the United States' Peace Corps, Jesuit Volunteer Corps, Nigerian Technical Aid Corps, European Work Camps, Japanese Overseas Cooperation Volunteers, Canada World Youth, and United Nations Volunteers. Programs differ greatly in their administration, targeted server groups, and goals and activities. Service programs may link nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in sending and hosting countries, or there may be complex, cooperative arrangements between government entities and a range of NGOs in different countries (McBride et al., 2003; Sherraden & Benitez, 2003b). The volunteers may be disadvantaged youth, privileged youth, mid-career adults, or retired business executives. The goals may be to address the citizenship development of the volunteers or the economic development of communities or both (McBride et al., 2003). The volunteers may be engaged in activities as diverse as cultural preservation, tutoring, watershed management or business development.

In a global assessment of civic service programs, international service[1] programs were the most prevalent form of service, above national service programs, constituting 59 percent of 210 identified programs worldwide (McBride et al., 2004). Ninety-three percent of the programs were administered by NGOs. A majority of these programs were based in North America and Western Europe and implemented in Southern countries. Full-time service participation was required by a majority of the programs with a median duration of three months, a mean of five months, and a range of one week to two years. Eligibility criteria for service ranged from age and residence to foreign language and specialized skills. Some programs required that the server pay for the service experience, while others provided stipends that were close to market wages in the host communities, begging the categorization of this service as "volunteerism." For about one-third of the programs, volunteers were provided housing and transportation assistance. Education, community development, and environmental protection were the primary areas of service, and goals included increasing the server's motivation to volunteer again, increasing the server's skill acquisition, promoting cultural understanding, creating or improving public facilities, and promoting sustainable resource use.

In spite of its prevalence and complexities, scholarship on international service lags behind the status of programs and policies (McBride et al., 2003; Perry and Imperial, 2001; Smith & Elkin, 1981; Woods, 1981). While there may be positive effects of international service, there are undoubtedly negative effects as well, marked by elitism, state interests, and vestiges of imperialism (Brav et al., 2002; Grusky, 2000; Simpson, 2004). Depending upon the goals, the programs may support diplomacy between nations, dispense aid, engage in social and economic development, or focus on the needs and development of the volunteers, constituting a

[1] Transnational service may be a subset of international service, which has more complex and cooperative service administration, goals, and activities (Sherraden & Benitez, 2003). In reporting these statistics, the two are added together.

type of "self-service." In this paper, we review what is known about international service. We begin by tracing its history, though we undoubtedly oversimplify the antecedents and evolution of international service in this brief space. We selectively identify the roles of colonialism, post-war reconstruction, international development, and globalization. Pairing the status of international service with its history, we identify possible pitfalls and potential of international service. Research implications are discussed with particular emphasis on international service as a development strategy.

INTERNATIONAL SERVICE: FROM COLONIALISM TO GLOBALIZATION

Missionary Service

International "service" has arguably existed since colonial expansion in the form of missions (Ehrichs, 2002). Through missions billed as aid and development Christianity expanded worldwide. Missionary service was aided with inventions in navigation, discovery of new lands, and Europe's growing trade with other parts of the world. The motivations and impacts of missionary service were complicated. While this form of service may have improved access to education, nutrition, and healthcare, on the whole, missionary service constituted a one-sided relationship between passive beneficiaries and "enlightened" reformers. Missions had complex relationships with a range of entities; they were strategic and sometimes conflicting partners with imperialists, and were seen as proselytizers or lifesavers to the local communities.

Mission service still exists today in multiple iterations, e.g., missions where proselytizing may be the focus, reverse missions based on reciprocity of service, or faith-based service emphasizing development as a self-expression of religious beliefs. While inter-religious conflict is leading policymakers and international organizations to consciously eschew religion as a basis

of program design, religion is used by others as a unifier across class, race, and nationality, with religion-based international service resurging in the first decade of the twenty-first century (Berger, 2003).

Reconstruction and Reconciliation: Transitioning to Development

The end of colonialism marked a significant turn in world affairs. The formation of the United Nations in 1945 spoke to the interdependence of nations and their impact on one another, signaling a value of equality among nations and a global responsibility to alleviate poverty (Beigbeder, 1991; Bell, 2000; Delano, 1966; Pinkau, 1979; Rehnstrom, 2000; Woods, 1981). In many ways, however, old relationships continued in the form of neo-imperialism with the world divided into developed, developing, and underdeveloped countries, perpetuating relationships of power and dominance (Brock et al., 2001; Escobar, 1995).

The Marshall Plan, enacted by the United States for Europe's reconstruction, influenced political developments in the region. The Truman doctrine accompanying the Marshall Plan consciously sought to tie international aid with geo-political and economic concerns. This affected subsequent relations between countries, including the orientation of international aid and service programs that were established in the same period (Canadian Oblate Missionaries and Volunteers (COMV), 1970; Kirby, 1973; McCarron, 2000; Waldorf, 2001). Development provided colonial nations a means of continuing engagement with the post-colonial world (Beigbeder, 1991; Bell, 2000; Hearn, 2002; Rodell, 2002). For instance, international development agencies were established by the Swedish government in 1962, the Canadian government in 1959, and the United States government in 1961, to continue engagement with erstwhile colonies and partly in response to the emerging realities of a bipolar world. In some cases, ex-administrators of the colonies led these efforts (Cobbs, 1996).

Outside of the State, NGOs with an international mission emerged in the postcolonial world as well with roots in post-war reconstruction and internationalism, exemplified by work camps organized collaboratively by non-religious and religious organizations such as Service Civil International (Woods, 1981). Other service-based voluntary organizations include the American Field Service (AFS) established in 1947 in USA, Volunteer Service Organization (VSO) established in 1958 in the UK, and Canadian Crossroads International formally established in 1966 in Canada (Chevannes & Hansel, 1990; Rivera et al., 1989).

International aid and volunteering efforts tended to carry vestiges of the colonial and imperialistic power dynamic: the North and West "helped" the South and East. Many programs inadvertently propagated stereotypical notions of what constitutes "developed" and "underdeveloped," which may have dictated the activities volunteers implemented as well as affected their attitudes toward the people with whom they worked (International Secretariat for Volunteer Service (ISVS), 1969; Nikolic, n.d.). Subordination and dependence on the one hand and superiority on the other may have been perpetuated through these efforts (Brav et al., 2002; Smith & Elkin, 1981; Returned Volunteer Action (RVA), 1978).

Beyond any expressed goals of aid or development, some programs were tools for communicating cultural and diplomatic ideas and fostering learning across cultural divides. Examples include the Peace Corps, British Volunteer Program, and Japan Overseas Volunteer Corps, established by State agencies as part of "grassroots" international diplomacy (Grusky, 2000; Hiebert, 1996; Hiroshi, 1999). The Peace Corps' three prong-goals articulated at its inception remain the same today: to help the people of interested countries and areas in meeting their needs for trained workers; to promote a better understanding of Americans among the peoples served; and to promote a better understanding of other peoples among Americans

(Coleman, 1981; Foroughi, 1991; Rodell, 2002). However, host countries often perceive the Peace Corps as a program focused on communicating American ideals, concerned disproportionately with benefits and learning for the volunteers (Hartzell, 1991; ISVS, 1969; Howland, 1997).

An original rationale for the Peace Corps was to provide "middle level managers" for development in Third World countries (Delano, 1966), suggesting a lack of similarly qualified individuals in the Third World. Some countries such as India discontinued hosting Peace Corps volunteers. Service programs struggled with this duality in approach between reciprocity and paternalism, creating ambivalence in policy as well as implementation. Neither have host countries been free of duality of purpose. Some organizations accept international volunteers for monetary benefits alone rather than pedagogical exchange and may be biased against female volunteers or those without technical skills.

The civil rights, citizen participation, and anti-war agendas of the 1960s and 1970s heightened people's interest in the relationship between developed and developing countries (Helms, 1990; Law, 1994; Kin'ichiro, n.d.; Pinkau, 1979; Rodell, 2002; Thompson, 1979; Williams, 1991; Woods, 1981; Zimmerman, 1995). The citizen participation agenda increasingly influenced the orientation of international development agencies programs. Top-down, bureaucratic development programs were not achieving their objectives and greater control by local people and beneficiary participation were demanded (Cornwall & Gaventa, 2001; Croft & Beresford, 1996). The emphasis in development shifted to working *with* rather than *for* the disadvantaged. Locals were treated not as passive recipients but as being actively involved in their own development (McGee, 2002). In international service, volunteers were to be learners

as well as teachers, working closely with grassroots development workers (Coleman, 1980; Lutyens, 1997; RVA, 1978; UN Volunteers, 1999b).

Contemporary Trends in International Service

Toward efficient reciprocity. With the rise of the Third Sector, direct and more intense relationships between small voluntary organizations in developed and developing countries have increased, (Rivera et al., 1989; Smith & Elkin, 1981). Programs that were earlier more server-driven have also undergone marked change, focusing on skills-driven and strategy-based volunteer roles aimed at mutual learning. In development policy, whether funds should be spent on volunteers or be used for direct assistance comes into question. As a result, policy is changing to recruit more qualified and skilled volunteers (Coleman, 1980; Hartzell, 1991). Reciprocity in service programs is increasing to an extent, with organizations opting for a two-way flow of volunteers and stays in the participating countries (Sherraden & Benitez, 2003b; Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO), 2003). International service is becoming more demanding, calling for greater skills and novel attitudes that question deeply ingrained notions of cultural and economic superiority (Bowers, 1995; Grusky, 2000; ISVS, 1970; Smith & Elkin, 1981; United Nations Development Program (UNDP), 2003; UN Volunteers (UNV), 1982).

The fall in international development funding has led to international service programs that engage both domestic and international volunteers, thus reducing costs on the one hand and creating new means of enhancing cross-cultural understanding (Kin'ichiro, n.d.; Takada, 2000; Wild, 1993). For example, United Nations Volunteers from the ex-Soviet countries helped facilitate a smooth transition to democracy as peace-keepers and election monitors (UNV, 1999a, 2001). UNDP programs also seek volunteers who are home country citizens or from

neighboring countries, serving a two-pronged role of reducing costs and increasing the legitimacy of social change.

With the fall of the Soviet Union and spread of neo-liberalism, the market has emerged as an important sector. The expansion as well as penetration of markets has seen multinational and transnational enterprises that span the globe. It is important that corporations understand the nations in which they operate and build trust in the face of criticism in local communities (VSO, 2003; Wild, 1993). International corporate volunteering has seen rapid growth since the 1990s and is comprised of both short and long-term intensive service by employees in developing countries where their firms have operations (Hiroshi, 1999; VSO, 2003).

Opposing pulls: Globalization and regionalism. Globalization has aided international travel and migration, contributing to the identity of the global citizen. There is a blurring of real and imagined boundaries, with people coming to see their fate connected socially, economically, and politically with those in other countries (Kabeer, 2002). Boundaries between the North and the South and developed and developing are blurring and being replaced by heterogeneous and complex identity formations with individuals holding multiple affinities. Simultaneously, there is also greater fragmentation and differentiation within nations as a result of increasing inequality and dispossession, leading to a need to protect identity (Kabeer, 2002). These opposing forces are played out on a global level in the formation of regional identities based on geographic location, shared histories or geopolitics, which are spurred in no small measure by the dual compulsions of open economies and regional protectionism (Sherraden MS., 2001). What began with the formation of a European cooperative bloc in the late 1990s dialectically spurred other such formations such as the North American economic cooperation bloc and the Commonwealth of Independent States.

Transnational service programs, a subset of international service, may promote the formation of regional solidarity (European Commission, 1996; National Committee on Volunteering, 2001; Sherraden & Benitez, 2003a; 2003b). Given highly unequal power relations among participant nations, transnational service is challenged to surmount these barriers and find common ground (Sherraden & Benitez, 2003a; 2003b). The European Volunteer Service (EVS) scheme and the North American Community Service (NACS) project engage youth across national borders in Europe and North America respectively to identify common problems and innovative solutions. Preliminary findings indicate both challenges and opportunities that may affect the formation of robust regional identities (Sherraden & Benitez, 2003a; 2003b).

Global, collective issues have also become the focus of international service programs. Environmental degradation has spurred international environmental service, especially in polluted zones and the ecological hotspots of South America and Southeast Asia (Lutyens, 1997). The scourge of AIDS has expanded volunteer roles in Africa (UNDP, 2003). Democratization of the newly independent nations of the Commonwealth of Independent States has created opportunities for targeted service in election monitoring and grassroots capacity building (UNV, 1999b).

Global citizenship, personal development, and "volunteer vacations." International service is a large rubric. If the basic criterion for distinguishing international service is people volunteering across nations (Smith et al., 2005), then a range of program forms can be included. Anecdotally, the increase in the number of international service programs can be attributed to the increase in the number of international NGOs worldwide. When the mission of these organizations is paired with globalization, there is increased interest in providing opportunities for service that contribute to an understanding of social, economic, and political connections

across nations and cultures. Recent developments include programs with primary goals of promoting global citizenship and personal development through international internships or practica and leisure that is paired with a "service" experience aimed at cultural immersion and tangible activities (Gunderson, 2005; Wagner, 2004). These are laudable goals, but they beg the question of the impacts on the served (Simpson, 2004). These programs may be less intensive and long-term and require fewer skills of the volunteers. The volunteers may receive more in return than the served.

INTERNATIONAL SERVICE: PITFALLS AND POTENTIAL

As demonstrated, international service has been used historically as a tool for diplomacy, aid, and development, and it still is. For example, a bi-partisan policy proposal of increasing recruits for the United States Peace Corps emerged in the wake of September 11th. Ethno-national groups marked by extreme difference are being brought together on common tasks, e.g., Hindus and Muslims restore common places of worship in old Punjab (UNV, 2001). International and transnational service is increasingly proposed as a policy strategy for youth development and promotion of intercultural competence, whereby youth serve in each other's countries with goals of increasing tolerance and understanding (UNV, 2001). The focus is on how the youth may be transformed as a result of the cross-cultural service experience.

Because research on the impacts of international service is limited, a cautionary approach is warranted. From consideration of the historical and contemporary influences on the nature and forms of international service, the following highlights potential pitfalls and potential for international service. We focus on reciprocity, impact, inclusion, and the institutional structures

that may mediate negative effects—especially the possible exploitation of the hosts and host communities.

Beyond Imperialistic Roots to Transnational Co-Management

What of the very development and administration of international service programs? Sherraden and Benitez (2003b) stress the importance of shared ownership of program goals and decision-making for equalizing power dynamics between nations and organizations that may be very unequal in terms of power, prestige, and resources. Using findings from the pilot of the North American Community Service project (Sherraden & Benitez, 2003a); they discuss the difficulties in achieving transnational collaboration and co-management. Given the remnants of imperialism and the potential for exploitation, numerous scholars call for conscientious attention to relations of dominance (Rodell, 2002) and possible discrimination (Helms, 1990), as well as differences in histories (Waldorf, 2001), attitudes (Nikolic, n.d.), and notions of expertise (ISVS, 1970).

Even with these histories and concerns, however, countries like Greece and Italy, with lower GNPs than other countries in the European Union, are enthusiastic about the social, economic, and community development potential of transnational service (Schroer, 2003). Approaching program development and implementation, conscious of these concerns but with reciprocity in mind, may help to realize the potential. Providing open and safe spaces for tabling concerns and creating mechanisms for shared responsibility and promote co-management should be documented. Effective strategies can then be utilized by other groups (Sherraden & Benitez, 2003a).

Toward Sustainable, Positive Impacts: Server Requirements and Training

Government and nongovernmental sponsors of international service programs have acknowledged the importance of values and approach in implementation. Emphasis has been placed on the nature of the activities implemented by volunteers as well as their attitudes toward those that they serve. Programs have sought the input of host communities and locals regarding what they consider to be priority projects and resource needs (Coleman, 1980; Rehnstrom, 2000; VSO, 2003). This is very important because locals have expressed that they or locally-based volunteers could have achieved the same or better outcomes than international volunteers (Rehnstrom, 2000). Ineffectiveness has been associated with a lack of volunteers' skills, orientation, and training (UNV, 1982). McBride, Benitez, and Sherraden (2003) found that technical skills are common eligibility criteria for contemporary international service programs. Since the1980s, UNDP programs require volunteers to have at least five years of development experience and minimum educational qualifications (UNV, 1982), and the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers and the Peace Corps, for example, require that volunteers participate in several months of in-country orientation. Quality service programs undoubtedly often require more resources and time, but the benefits may outweigh the costs.

Across a range of service programs, the volunteers themselves identify remaining weaknesses (Adams et al., 1996; Schroer, 2003; Shea, 1966; Waldorf, 2001; Williams, 1991; UN Chronicle, 1999). For example, training often does not address practical ways of surmounting cultural differences (Smith, 1993), power relations between the server and served (Ehrichs, 2000), and biases among volunteers as well as locals (Grusky, 2000; Helms, 1990). Sensitive topics may not be addressed and volunteers may not be taught how to address issues related to personal security, racial discrimination, or national and international politics (Bowers, 1995;

Cobbs, 1996; Takada, 2000). Volunteers have suggested that they be trained in the "soft skills" of service as well, such as engaging with individuals, facilitating group processes, and collaborative problem-identification (Heddy, 2000; Phillips, 1989). Furthermore, training and orientation need not stop at pre-service but could continue throughout the service experience and perhaps even upon volunteers' return to their home countries to cope with reverse culture shock and retaining skills gained during the volunteering experience (Williams, 1991). Volunteers have expressed benefits of mentoring and support from host country personnel, fellow volunteers, and program alumni (Adams et al., 1996; Bashor, 1969; Law, 1994; RVA, 1978; Smith, 1993). Given commonalities across international service programs, research that focuses on the effects of eligibility requirements, the content and length of training, and the mechanisms of on-going support can promote standard processes and curricula that can promote positive impacts.

Inclusive International Service

International service has been attributed with a range of positive impacts on the volunteers, which undoubtedly results from travel, adventure, and unique educational experiences (Larson, 2000; Heddy, 2000; Law, 1994; Lutyens, 1997; Hiebert, 1996) Volunteers may also receive post-service awards that have lasting impact, e.g., lump-sum stipends or grants and educational credit (Hartzell 1991; McCarron, 2000). Who benefits from this experience is a matter of equity and inclusion.

African-Americans, Latinos, and Asian-Americans form a negligible proportion of Peace Corps volunteers, far below their actual proportions in the United States' population (Hartzell, 1991; Helms, 1990; Thompson, 1979). Across a range of programs, including Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers, the Peace Corps, United Nations Volunteers, and Canadian Crossroads

International, there have been more males than females in service roles (Cohn & Wood, 1985; Cohn et al., 1981; Hiroshi, 1999; Williams, 1991). This may reflect bias in recruitment or host countries' requests. Beyond ethnicity and gender, those with physical disabilities or who are of low-income may not be able to travel to another country, leaving physical supports or paid work or responsibilities (Thompson, 1979; Xin, 2001; Zimmerman, 1995). Many individuals of disadvantage may not see international service as a viable career or educational opportunity, because incentives or supports are not available to promote their participation.

A recent emphasis of national and international service programs is the promotion of inclusion of traditionally-excluded groups (Zimmerman, 1995; Schroer, 2003; Foroughi, 1991). While this is an encouraging development—spreading the possible benefits to these groups, research has demonstrated that programs need to be conscious that targeted groups do not feel stigmatized (Adams et al., 1996). Future research can document what recruitment strategies, task assignments, financial supports and awards, and physical accommodations promote the widest involvement.

CONCLUSION

International service promotes diplomacy, aid, development, and personal development, but the degree to which it achieves any of these is largely unknown, negatively or positively. Much of the research on international service is perceptual—perceptions of the served, volunteers, program administrators, and policy makers. International service has the potential to promote tolerance, understanding, and peace, while also promoting social, economic, and community development for the hosts and host communities. We recommend a focus on these potential impacts and what will mediate the possible pitfalls.

The impact of historical relationships as well as external factors that influence service programs cannot be underestimated. Program development, administration, and implementation are delicate processes in a globalized world marked on the one hand by power differentials and on the other by norms of access, participation, and justice. We recommend attention to collaborative relationships among program sponsors; orientation, training, and support of volunteers; and incentives and facilitation for participation by excluded groups. Research is called for that advances a common understanding of effective program models that achieve goals for both the host communities and the volunteers.

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